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#ReviewBowlingGreen: Food and Attractions Guide for International Students

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REVIEW BOWLING GREEN:
FOOD AND ATTRACTION GUIDE FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENT

A Capstone Experience

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree Bachelor of Arts with
Honors College Distinction at Western Kentucky University

By

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ABSTRACT

Being in a different country, far away from home, surrounded by strangers that speak a different language than your mother tongue is daunting. Most international students often feel out of place when they arrive in America for the first time. What can we do to change international students' perspective of Bowling Green from one of being a "boring, small town" to a vibrant growing community? This project will use social media platform like Facebook to promote restaurants and other attractions. Users can write reviews of restaurants, shops, and places to visit in Bowling Green. By including the hashtag #ReviewBowlingGreen on the reviews, people will be able to find more information easier. This will allow people to interact, leave suggestions and questions, and have conversations under the posts. Students will be engaged by including interviews and surveys from both international and domestic students. This project aims to help WKU international students from all over the world feel more comfortable and familiar with the town, making Bowling Green their home away from home.

Keywords: International Students, Review, Bowling Green, Restaurants, Attractions, Social Media, Facebook

Dedicated to my friends from America, and from all over the world.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Abstract.....	ii
Dedication.....	iii
Acknowledgements.....	iv
Vita.....	v
Chapters:	
1. Introduction.....	1
2. Methods.....	3
3. Results.....	12

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Being in a different country, being away from home, surrounded by strangers that speak a different language than your mother tongue can be really scary and challenging. As an international student, I understand the struggles that incoming international students face. It is sad when I often hear my international student friends talking about how lost they are in the new town. They often ask each other where to eat and what we could do around Bowling Green. Many international students that have been here longer sometimes cannot even answer the questions themselves, and end up with the answer, “I don’t know,” or “There is not a lot of things you could do here. It’s such a small town and really boring.”

Before I came up with this project, I asked myself a question: “How can I fix this problem of international students being bored and feeling lost in Bowling Green?” My experience is quite different from those mentioned above because I went to high school here in America and fortunately have many American friends. However, like everyone else, I did not first arrive having many American friends. I understand the struggles. Many international students do not have a lot of local friends who can suggest to them what and where to spend their free time. This makes it even harder when living in a new country with very little to no familiar faces at all.

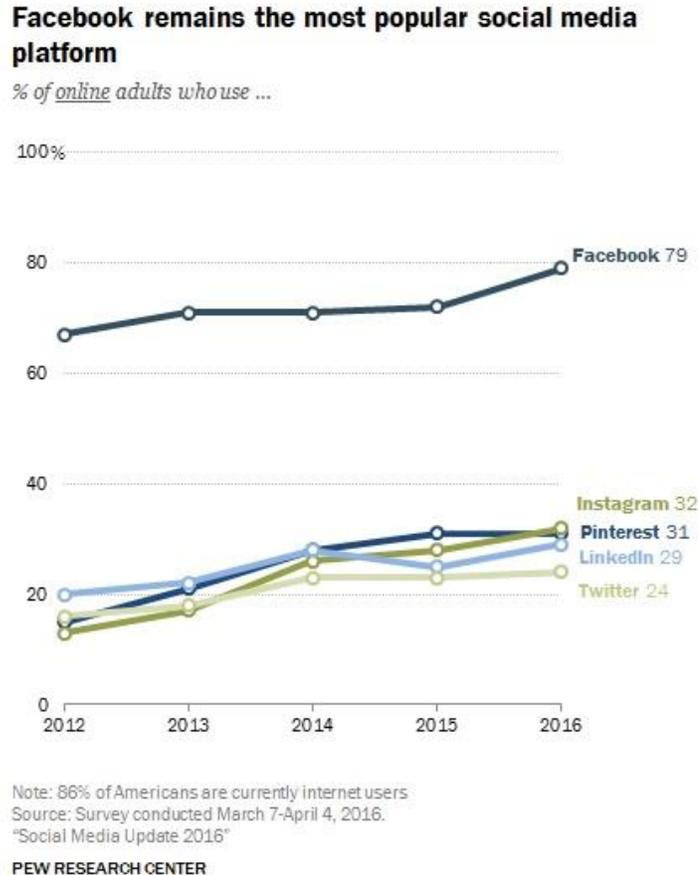
Our education is indeed very important, but as an international student, there is so much more to learn and explore other than in class or in textbooks. Being able to enjoy American culture, food, activities and places to hang out with friends, etc., are also very important to one's experience in a different country. This is one of the main reasons we come here: to learn, to explore, and to share. Many international students only hangout among themselves or with their group of friends from the same country because that is their comfort zone. That makes it even harder for them to get to know the area. Most international students often do not know about many restaurants and attractions, or even as simple as where to get necessary things around Bowling Green. This project would help change that.

CHAPTER 2

METHODS

The majority of Americans say they get news from social media, use social media in the context of work like seeking out employment or jobs, and also engage in an ongoing effort to navigate the complex privacy issues. Many people also turn to specific sites and platforms in the course of living their social lives online. Facebook continues to be America's most popular social networking platform. According to the survey from *Pew Research Center*, nearly eight in ten online Americans or about 79% use Facebook, 32% use Instagram, and 24% use Twitter. (See Figure 1)

Figure 1



The numbers of users are growing every year, not only in America but also all across the world. Facebook is the common social media that allows international students and domestic students to get connected, along with Instagram. This project uses the advantage in the world of advance technology to connect and help the international students that come to America to explore the culture, and get connected with the town.

In the world of fast-growing technology and social media, there are a lot of benefits. This project is inspired by the use of social media in Thailand in order to promote restaurants and other attractions by writing a review of good restaurants, things to do, places to buy things, or places to visit. For example, people post photos of food and the environment of a restaurant with a review of why it is a good place to eat. By including the hashtag “#ReviewBowlingGreen” in the reviews on social media, people will be able to find out more information easier. Hashtag on social media is a very good marketing strategy for getting people’s attention and inviting people to participate. A Facebook page is created with the same name of the hashtag that represents the town, which is “Review Bowling Green.”

Using social media like Facebook is not only a great way to reach people, but it also allows people to interact and have conversations under the post, ask questions, or leave suggestions. One big challenge from this project is how to get students and other people interested in looking at the Review Bowling Green page on Facebook. In order for this project to be effective, many people need to know about it. One main idea to solve this is to get students involved. First is the use of the hashtag. Hashtags are powerful tools for conveying a conversation around a strategically chosen subject. So by using

#ReviewBowlingGreen, it does not only send a message, but also convenes a conversation. This approach has seen success before in many areas such as politics, promoting rights, or promoting TV shows.

To get more people excited and interested, this project includes interviews and surveys of domestic students' thoughts on what their favorite restaurants are in town; likewise, providing international students' thoughts about their favorite restaurants, especially ones from their own countries. For example, Thai students are asked about their favorite Thai restaurants or the best and most authentic Vietnamese restaurants from Vietnamese students. After that, people can follow the results and go review those restaurants. Then reviews are posted on Review Bowling Green page so people can see and acknowledge. This is beneficial and interesting to not only the international students, but also the domestic students or anyone who is interested in trying other countries' foods but do not know which restaurants they should go to, what to order, or are afraid of a bad experience. With the use of social media, anyone would be able to see the environments, the food, and be able to share them on their personal social media page easily and quickly. Posting and updating the page regularly is vital, but posting too often can also overwhelm people and the posts can get ignored. Thus, managing efficient time is very important. I tried to post at least three posts a week.

This project started in late February through the end of April, with almost three months. The first problem I encountered was how to get students and other people interested in looking at the Review Bowling Green page on Facebook. In order for this project to be effective, many people need to know about it so that it can reach more international students. The use of the hashtag was one strategy, but it was not good

enough. One interesting aspect I learned about the hashtag is that it is not as popular of a tool as in Thailand, where I drew this idea from. Within the first month of creating the page and trying to post it on my own social media platforms using the hashtag, only a few of my friends liked the page.

The first idea to solve this is to get students more involved. After doing the surveys, interviews, and several potluck dinners, the amount of likes have increased to almost a hundred in the second month, and over two hundred after two months.

Surveys and Interviews

I carried out several surveys with the international students throughout the semester to find out their needs and how I could help them solve their problems regarding Bowling Green culture. This is to also help guide this project in the right direction, and not just assume the problems of international students. Here are some of the focus questions on my interviews, which are separated into three parts:

I. Level of Experience With the U.S.

1. What is your name and where are you from?
2. How long have you been here?
3. How do you like it here in America? Why?
4. What do you like/dislike about America?
5. Where is your favorite place to visit or hang out around here? What are your favorite restaurants?
6. What do you usually do in your free time?

II. Intercultural Experience in U.S.

1. Is America different from your expectations? What is the biggest difference between America and where you are from?
2. What surprised you the most? What is the biggest culture shock you have experienced?

III. Discovering issues

1. What do you miss the most while staying here?
2. How much do you think Americans know about your country/culture? How much do you think you know about American culture?
3. What are things that you would like to ask the local or Americans, but do not have a chance or might be afraid to ask?
4. If you could change something about this town that would make your life here happier, what would that be? What if you had a magic wand, what would you like to change?

Survey Questions:

1. What is your name and where are you from?
2. What do you do in your free time?
3. Where is your favorite place to visit or hang out/eat?
4. From the scale 1-5 (the least to the most), how do you like Bowling Green?
5. Explain the number you give in the previous question. What do you like/ dislike about Bowling Green?
6. What are things that you would like to ask the local or Americans, but do not have a chance or might be afraid to ask?

7. If you could change something about this town that would make your life here happier, what would that be? What if you had a magic wand, what would you like to change?

Potluck Dinner and ESLI Student Meeting

To carry out the survey and interviews, and introduce my project more effectively, I did several potluck dinners at my house and invited my international student friends. With a relaxing environment along with great food, the international students seemed to be more relaxed and more open. I was able to ask questions and hand out the survey after dinner. I also did a survey and several interviews with the ESLI students through my Intercultural Communication or COMM463 class, which allowed me to interact with new and old international students at WKU.

Many recommendations of where to eat and hangout around town, not only came from the international students' favorites, but also came from American students. Domestic students tend to know more about the town and they hang out off campus more often, even if they are not originally from here. I also invited my American friends to the potluck dinners for the survey and explained my project to them. Here are the questions on the survey that I have given to American students:

1. Where are you originally from?
2. What are your favorite restaurants in town?
3. If you are not a local, what are things that you wish you knew when you first got to Bowling Green? If you are a local, what would you like to tell the newcomers about this town?

4. Imagine if an international student asks you about interesting attractions or places to visit around town, where would you recommend to them?
5. Imagine if you just made a new friend who is not from Bowling Green or is from different country, where would be the first place you'd take him or her to hang out or eat?
6. What are some things you would like to ask international students but do not have a chance or might be afraid to offend them?
7. How do you think I could make this project more interesting or more effective?
How do you think you could make the international students feel more like home here in Bowling Green?

Results from Surveys and Interviews

What I have learned from this process has gained me a lot of knowledge in terms of cultural differences and the struggles that the international students have. There are some conflicts with relationships between American students and international students as well. With the survey, there was a limited number of questions I could ask. It is not a good idea to overwhelm the survey takers with loads of questions because it would make the survey takers put less effort on the questions, thus, result in less effective answers. I continued to develop the questions on my survey to be more and more effective throughout the project.

The first set of questions includes the name, where the person is from, how the person feels about Bowling Green, and their favorite place to eat and hangout. The same survey was given to both domestic and international students. However, the answers were not very satisfying. I found out when you ask a student what they thought about Bowling

Green, most often time the answer was, “I like it,” or “It is okay.” Another interesting thing is that many international students answered that their favorite restaurants are chain restaurants like Olive Garden or Cheddar’s. This showed that many international students are not very familiar with local restaurants.

After the first survey, some questions were edited and more questions were added, as shown in the survey questions section above. The second and third survey were more effective. Many students said that they do not know a lot of places to eat or hang out around town, so they usually hang out on campus or their apartment with friends. Places to eat and things to do around town are also what the international students would like to ask American students. The majority of international students rated Bowling Green a three out of five, even though when asked, they said they liked it here. Most students said they like that Bowling Green is peaceful, safe, and quiet. Some said they like the nature and friendly people. However, when asked about their dislikes, almost all students had very similar answers: it is inconvenient to get around, not many options to eat and hang out, and boring. Many students said they would like to change the transportation of Bowling Green and have more recreation places.

The results from interviewing with ESLI students are also very similar from the surveys but helped me to deeper understand the struggles that international students face along with their culture. One big thing is cultural differences between their countries and the U.S. that they are trying to adapt to and learn. However, it will be very hard to learn if they do not get out there and explore the new culture.

Other strategies

Offering gift cards from shops and restaurants around town is a great marketing strategy. Asking people to like and share the page and offering them a chance to win gift cards brought many people, not only international students, but everyone who is interested to come like the page. It does not take much effort to like and share the page, and the offer is tempting. The friends of people who have liked and shared the page can also see the post, and decide to like and share the page. I also talked to the members of WKU international student clubs about the project to get the word out. Many are interested in the page because of the common goal that we have: to help international students feel like home while at WKU. Many agreed to share the page on their social medias as well. This was a great way to reach other students from the inside out.

Cooperation from restaurants and businesses was needed in order to make this project more successful. There was only one restaurant that did not let me do a review or take pictures at their restaurant because they were closing, and they wanted to keep it quiet. Most of the restaurants were glad to cooperate after realizing that it is a win-win situation for both. This project can help increase their business.

With creating a review page, the content has to be attractive and welcoming. Photos of the food and environment taken by experienced photographers would greatly enhance the appeal factor. But hiring a professional photographer was not a good option due to expenses. This project has the potential to be interdisciplinary, so bringing in the creative minds of the journalism students is one great option. I contacted a journalist major student and asked if she could teach me tips on how to take good photos and how to edit them. It was such an interesting and fun process. WKU IT Center allows students to rent DSLR cameras, which help taking good quality photos.

CHAPTER 3

RESULTS

By the end of April, Review Bowling Green page has gotten two hundred and five likes, and two hundred and seven followers. My main objective was to help international students have a better experience with Bowling Green while they are achieving their educational goal at WKU. Many students that completed surveys, interviews, and are following the page have said that they found this page very interesting and beneficial to them. It helps them to learn what this town has to offer outside of campus.

By doing several surveys, it has increased my ability to ask questions effectively and contextualize thoughts and ideas within the broader discipline. I have gained so much experience and knowledge in many fields, along with communication skills that will help me build strong relationships with other people after I graduate. The Review Bowling Green page not only helped the international students, but also helped me better understand the marketing world with hands-on experience, which increases my knowledge in marketing and sales, my minor field. It offers me the opportunity to gain real world experience and some of the skills necessary for my future career and my everyday life. This project helped me to not only learn about others and find out their needs, but more importantly, find out about myself. I found out I had many abilities that I did not know I had before. It also helped me to be a better thinker, become more creative, and increased my problem-solving skills as I worked throughout the project. One of the

most significant aspects of this project has been the opportunity to apply what I have learned here at WKU in real life, in order to complete this project.

What I have Applied from My courses

Many classes I have taken have helped me understand what is happening with the international students and their livelihood here in America better, along with the relationships with the domestic students. It helps me understand myself and what I have gone through and continue to go through as an international student myself.

Barna's *Stumbling Blocks in Intercultural Communication* and Jackson's *Introducing Language and Intercultural Communication on Boundaries in Intercultural Interpersonal Relationship* (219) from my Intercultural Communication class reading, have explained the assumption of similarity and language differences that challenge international students' ability to communicate and build relationships with others in different countries. Many international students assume there are similarities between their culture and American culture to some degree. When they first arrive, everything was very exciting because they have the expectation and eager to learn new things. After living in the U.S. for some time, the excitement will begin to decrease as their expectations are not met. This can be explained by the U-Curve theory of cultural adaptation (Jackson 202), which is illustrated in Figure 2.

From the survey questions, I found out that many Americans do not understand the struggles that international students face. From the question, "What are the things you would like to ask international students but do not have a chance or might be afraid to offend them?" some ask why international students tend to hang out only among each other, "isn't it the point of coming to America? To learn our culture?" I found a great

explanation from my courses. Many international students experience the “acculturation stress,” or a negative psychological reaction to the experience of changes that take place after contact between individuals or groups with different cultural backgrounds (Jackson 186-7). Many experience a culture shock, seen in the lowest point in the U-Curve model, that might be caused by unmet expectations, miscommunication, uncertainty, conflict in values, and feeling like they stand out from others.

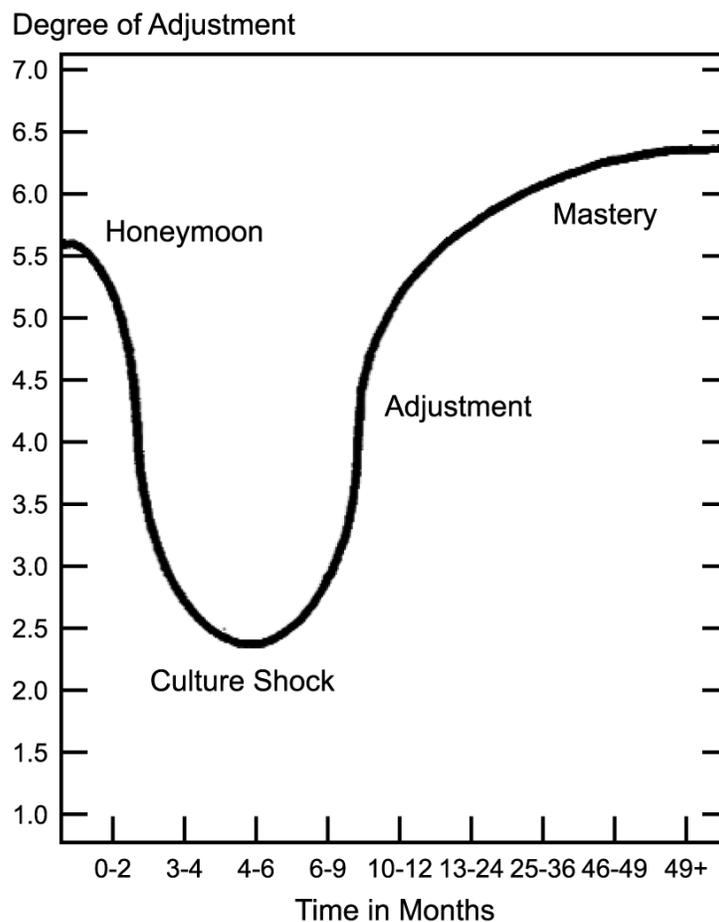


Figure 2 The U-curve adjustment model

The feeling of standing out creates the notion of “ingroup” and “outgroup,” which I learned from my Social Psychology and Intercultural Communication class. According to the book *Social Psychology* by David Myers and Jean Twenge, we identify and associate ourselves with certain groups and gain self-esteem by doing so. We compare

and contrast our group with other groups with a favorable bias toward our own group (273). This creates “us-ness” or a group of people who share a sense of belonging and a feeling of common identity. This helps explain why many international students tend to stick with each other; they feel more comfortable. It also helps them gain self-esteem. What is interesting is that many of the Americans that have asked this specific question, are the same ones that are taking this course with me.

From this situation, we will use Ting-Toomey’s transcultural communication competence that I have learned from my communication class to help explain this. It is a process of managing group differences on a transcultural level by using knowledge, mindfulness, communication skills, and applying them ethically in intercultural situations. Without culture-sensitive knowledge, people cannot become aware of the ethnocentric lenses (266). Many students are not aware of the culture differences in others, both American students and international students. This can potentially lead to conflicts and build a wall between people from different cultural backgrounds. This is why knowledge is the most critical aspect that underscores the other two aspects of this model. The second component is mindfulness. Mindfulness requires us to tune our own internal assumptions, cognitions, and emotions to others’ (p. 267). It requires us to be mindful of intercultural differences and view situations from different viewpoints. Having knowledge of other cultures is crucial, but being mindfulness is also very important in order to communicate and build relationships effectively. The third component is the communication skills component, which refers to “our operational abilities to interact appropriately, effectively, and satisfactorily in a given situation” (p.269). Mindful observation and mindful listening are the core of communication skills.

Being aware of others' nonverbal communication can give us cues to communicate more effectively. These components mentioned above can help prevent conflicts between people from different cultural backgrounds and improve relationships between international students and American students at WKU.

Another thing that students have to be careful of when dealing with intercultural communication is what is called "high-context culture," and "low-context culture." Low context culture is more individualistic, whereas high context culture is more collectivistic or group-oriented. Many international students are from countries that have high-context culture which values harmony and peace, collaboration, and traditions (Ting-Toomey 289). America is considered to be a low-context culture, which values individuals more than groups. So when dealing with both groups while doing interviews and surveys, not only did I have to achieve transcultural communication competence, but I also had to be aware of these culture differences as a whole. What is interesting is how different cultures have their own ways of answering the questions. With American students, it is easier to ask questions and get straightforward answers. However, with many international students that are from high-context culture, they tend to hide their real feelings and opinions inside because they do not want to cause any conflicts. This is why adapting effective questions and being able to understand and build trust with them is very important while communicating.

"The key to valuing differences is to realize that all people see the world, not as it is, but as they are," is one of my favorite quotes from Stephen Covey's book, *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. Learning about different cultures and perspectives while carrying out this project has been a challenge. The book *7 Habits of Highly Effective*

People that I have read from my Advanced Personnel Selling class has had such a huge impact on how I carried out this project. Every chapter of the book has helped me throughout this semester.

Each chapter is so beneficial to both international students and domestic students. *7 Habits* taught me to be proactive and to take responsibility for my own actions; do not blame others. The second habit is beginning with the end in mind, set goals, and work your way towards it. Both of these have helped me to stay on task while doing this project, to remember the goal. Put first things first and think win-win in every situation.

Another important thing that I have learned and applied to this project, is seeking first to understand, then to be understood. Unless you understand the other person, you won't be able to give effective advice to him or her. Covey said we have a tendency to rush in, to fix things up with good advice. But we often fail to take the time to diagnose, to really deeply understand the problem first. This chapter helped me tremendously to understand the need of international students and to ask effective questions on my surveys and interviews. Communication is the most important skill in life. We interact with other people every day. Building the skills of empathetic listening on a base of my own character that encouraged openness and trust from my participants was critical to my project. Ninety percent of our communication is nonverbal, and it is limited by texting. Thirty percent is our sound and tone of voice, and sixty percent is our body language (Covey). Being aware of this will help us get cues from people in high-context cultures that tend to hide their feelings and not open up as much. We have to keep in mind to ask the right question, to seek to understand and not to respond, to listen to other people's feelings, not only for meaning. Do not listen with the intent to reply, but listen with the

intent to truly understand. This book is so powerful for all people from different cultural backgrounds.

The main goal of this project was to help international students get more connected with the town and make this town their second home; however, I realized that this project has helped and changed me more than anyone else. I found myself falling in love with this town. Only three months of doing this project, I feel more connected with this place and its people. I feel belonged here more than ever before. I was able to build stronger relationships with both domestic and international students, along with the locals, professors, and WKU staffs. This project has improved me to be a better scholar, and a better person. It has helped me prepare for the real world after graduation. This town has so much to offer and it holds a very special place in my heart. I really wish every international student can experience the same thing I did. This project allowed me to be creative in the most possible way. Hopefully this project can inspire other students in the future to help making WKU and the town Bowling Green everyone's home away from home.

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